



RICARDO PAPACCI 2023-02-03

## THE MELANCHOLIA OF CLASS: INTELLECTUALS AND SUBCULTURES IN CONSUMER SOCIETY

NONPOLITICS BAUDRILLARD, CLASSE, CONSUMER SOCIETY, MAY68, MELANCHOLIA, SUBCULTURE

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Until a few decades ago, the nature of the problems addressed by intellectuals was purely gnoseological. Intellectuals were deemed such to the extent that they knew something and were able to reason with intelligence. Various attempts by small groups and idiosyncratic schools of

thought — or “subcultures” — to subvert the dominant way of thinking have been recorded since Ancient Greek culture. However, it is only with the rise of Marxism, and especially following the events of 1968, that all forms of thought had to come to terms — the sentence may end here! — with the demands of sociology, anthropology, and basic economics. Since then, intellectuals have not been able to utter a word with the lightheartedness of the previous eras. Ever since the middle class has been described up to its darkest features — i.e., the legitimacy of power — even just making a statement about a chair meant taking sides. Hence the warning “everything is political.” Today, to speak and take for granted that certain people have the right to exercise power over others is equal to being middle class, or at least upholding bourgeois or capitalist ideas.

On the other hand, there is working-class culture. It is defined by people who are submissive to such forms of power or denounce them. To discuss anything in the absence of this Manichean axis is held by working-class culture as evidence of middle-class ideology. There is no escape. In the introduction of Cynthia Cruz’s book *The Melancholia of Class*, the author makes a declaration of intent by announcing that “neoliberalism insists there are no social classes, there is, according to its ideology, no working class. By default, the working-class subject miraculously does not exist.” According to the author, “To insist otherwise is to appear ungrateful, negative, depressing, and often mentally ill.”

Today’s intellectuals are torn by such awareness. They are compelled to make a choice in this regard or else remain ambiguous. Whatever the field of cultural production, a particular form of communication is used to address a particular audience, and bad reviews are feared above all. Is there really anything worse for a militant than being regarded as a “middle-class intellectual”? Probably not. Whoever does not find these few words offensive is not truly a militant and is likely to think via an abstract critical taxonomy (perhaps to be read as even anarchic or agnostic). People like this, and precisely because of this, have no right to talk about politics: to be fair, they clearly can talk about it, but their opinions will not be welcomed by the militant community. On the other hand, those who have this problem close to their heart have to make a choice that will influence their whole existence and be affected by the advocated level of radicalism. For example, a working-class thinker who wants to work on hegemonic culture is granted access to all media, from TV to social media. Nonetheless, he will be taken seriously only by the audience of that mediascape without making an issue of its capitalistic structure and the overt forms of political propaganda. In this regard, a good example is the life story of the Italian cartoonist Zerocalcare: a fierce militant who lived through the world of community centres and Rome’s underground punk culture before bumping into worldwide fame and the appropriation of his public figure by hegemonic culture.

Zerocalcare’s statements are hyped by a long list of presumptuous subordinate clauses working as justifications for a world so removed from and antithetical to the one where he grew up. The glare of the militants from which Zerocalcare has to defend and justify himself seems to shout that one cannot have his cake and eat it too. No one will ever be welcome by the reality of 1990s community centres and, at the same time, the audience of magazines like *Espresso* and TV

shows like Propaganda Live. Unless, of course, one can restrain from talking about political and social issues — and well, then the scope of subjects to be discussed would be restricted at a dizzying rate.

In a similar way, Cynthia Cruz follows in Zerocalcare's footsteps. The first part of her book is a long justification following the story of her humble beginnings in a middle-class background. But there is a big problem here: "The town we lived in and the schools I attended were middle-class, and though I was never conscious of this, I imagined that my living amongst the middle class would somehow eventually make me middle-class too," precisely, and perhaps more simply, because "the entire world I was surrounded by was middle-class." According to those thinkers, for example, Mario Tronti, considered to be veterocommunists by mainstream politics even if they wrote the history of global political thought, the disappearance of the antithesis between the working class and the bourgeoisie, which brought about an all-inclusive middle class, was one of the main reasons for the disappearance of that political struggle that could have overthrown capitalism. According to Tronti, one of the founders of an unorthodox Marxist movement called Operaismo (also known as Workerism), such an event correlates with the beginning of consumer society. After consumer society, any form of political activism with a revolutionary programme is out of question. After all, Jean Baudrillard, who first introduced the definition of consumer society in his popular 1970 book, had already stated that all revolutionary acts following that era, described above all by the development of media and advertising, were nothing less than the simulated reproduction of content. Throughout the 1960s, Baudrillard had the chance to learn more about early consumer society. The decade witnessed a popular belief in general welfare — never before had such a large amount of people owned so many appliances, for example, refrigerators — followed by a stage of cultural conformism. In this regard, 1968 was the acme of both conformism and revolt. It was the simulacrum of revolution as such: bodies were set free, the human being was emancipated, and revolution had become a deed. After the revolutionary feast of 1968, and since nothing had really changed or got worse, there was nothing else besides nihilism.

We should then try finding out once and for all if the general political uprising of 1968 was a revolutionary attempt akin to the Russian revolution — that is, whether the protests of 1968 represented the struggle to end the abuse of the powerful against the weak. Or was it instead a macro product of the consumer society? Baudrillard, for instance, argued for the latter. After consumer society (and post-1968), the floor opened up for counterculture — even if counterculture itself was not new, it never held such an important role in society. It was as if someone thought: mainstream culture is such and such, and it is going to remain thus, we might as well make or join our own culture. Subcultural pride lasted decades. For several years, subcultures were thought to have a function. "Illusion," nonetheless, "is the fundamental rule," as Baudrillard wrote. After the general uprising of 1968, after everything had been revolutionised, from sex to bodies, there was nothing left but nihilism. Everything had changed. At the same time, everything was the same.

In her book, Cynthia Cruz gives an account of her encounter with Hüsker Dü and X ("the music

and lyrics met my internalized rage and somehow, through this meeting of affects, I felt immense relief”), hinting at the nihilistic matrix caused by the pleasure of listening. Then, she argues against the dream of a revolutionary power within progressivism. The idea of progress, she writes, is “a middle-class ideology, an ideology of the status quo.” It is “superficial and anti-revolutionary.” Very well. But underground culture, too — the subculture which “become, through their mere existence, acts of resistance to the status quo” — would never declare itself revolutionary. Perhaps the etymology of the terms can shine a light on the issue: to be beneath or against hegemonic culture. Subculture and counterculture are near-synonyms: both take for granted the existence of another culture from which they distance themselves. Generally speaking, a subculture is a group of people sharing odd values and interests that nevertheless do not seem to challenge hegemonic culture; at this point, the meaning of the word counterculture is self-evident.

Subcultures then would not exist without hegemonic culture. There is a sort of resignation regarding this discourse, a kind of defeatism which takes for granted the existence of a world with a flawed culture and, although popular, sets itself in a relationship of power against an inferior, lower, twisted, and deviant culture — that is, a subculture or working-class culture. Each culture describes itself in contrast with a “truer” and higher culture — a Culture with a capital C. The latter is neither classical nor pop culture, but just the dominant culture (where the word dominant is suggestive of the concept of dominance). To begin with, we are dealing with a type of culture that is neither progressive nor envisioning the future with optimism — the future is rather dark and grey. However, it is not out of question to have nice pyjama parties (like Beat Happening used to do, it is said) or “to put flowers in your cannons” and advocate for peace, as hippies, the pioneers of countercultures, used to.

If it is true that the word melancholia is oftentimes associated with something lost in time, it is also worth considering the temporal quality of counterculture as such. For instance, if a particular approach was countercultural in the past, it is not always such today. And if counterculture can be described as an avant-garde movement with values that were either ignored or rejected by hegemonic culture, the same values are then also re-appropriated by hegemonic culture later on. A clear example is rap, which due to its explicit, highly critical, and controversial lyrics has been one of the most countercultural genres ever; it is also a genre full of misogynistic statements and the mother of all taboo words, the n-word. Today, however, an artist like Kendrick Lamar won the Pulitzer prize and stopped performing at a concert when he saw a white person from the audience singing the lyrics of a song which included the n-word. There has always been some kind of confusion between what is countercultural and what is not; but today, it seems that its original meaning has been lost completely.

Coming back to consumer society, subcultures, as they had been known by the people who fell in love with that world, cannot exist today. In fact, their golden age was contemporary with the explosion of mass consumption, as well as the decades when the industrial-scale reproduction of any human desire, passion, and hobby was being tested. Of course, music, literature, cinema, and art were part of this too. An event like this accelerated creative and productive processes —

often not at all related to art itself — to such a great extent that it used up all that could be consumed within just a few decades. All forms and contents have been worn out, as much as any counter-form and counter-content. The immediacy that defines the internet was just the coup de grace. In the past, the opinion of a writer about a particular historical event would be known and circulated only after a certain amount of time and exclusively through hypomodern media. The internet, on the other hand, finally made us modern. All events, even the less meaningful ones, can (and must) be immediately commented on. As a result, intellectual life is more and more driven into an existential path towards total atelophobia, in opposition to the romanticised version of the free spirit of the thinker that hegemonic culture passed on.

In contrast with what is generally held, subcultures were not revolutionary but nihilistic. The proof, in my opinion, is the last authentic musical subculture today: vaporwave. Vaporwave is an odd one, the first subculture to be utterly different from the previous ones. First of all, vaporwave is not bound to any specific territory: it established itself as a pure internet phenomenon. It is also free from both physical media and live concerts: it is a virtual movement in every possible way. But the message of this fully-virtual subculture, made of enigmatic avatars and nicknames, is nothing less than the utopistic end of the internet project. Vaporwave's imaginary celebrates a bright and technological future (yet to take place), which the early internet age advertised to its users — and beyond — since the 1990s.

The message of subcultures was nihilistic, but it was nevertheless a message. At least, people had (have?) a chance to develop a kind of class proto-consciousness through exposure to subcultures. Whoever falls under the spell of subcultures, even if they do not declare it explicitly, should have found themselves ipso facto in opposition to power structures. Perhaps also because subcultures are a sort of pre-linguistic content that scholars and intellectuals will later tediously and pedantically put into words. Also, Cynthia Cruz seems to have understood that subcultures no longer exist. Subcultures are disappearing like any other product of consumer society. Any product, like anything else, for that matter, has a life cycle ending with death. Hence the romanticisation of class: the melancholia of class.

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